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ABSTRACT

More than 100 decontextualized, formalistic paradigms of the narrative process are in existence, but little work has been done to apply the insights narrative theory yields to news and journalistic form. Given the journalistic assumption that facts can be presented neutrally, news professionals tend to maintain that narratives do not exist outside of "soft" feature writing. Journalistic narrative is an attempt to bring into line an essentially phenomenological diversity of meaningful perceptions. News narratives can be seen to operate through a system of intertextual displacements, sometimes through omission or default. Deconstruction as well as reader-response theory can help tease out the tensions and contradictions ideological narratives work to suppress. They can do this by citing the multiple meanings simultaneously operative in language and by demonstrating empirically the range of responses that result at the receiving end of the reading process. Reader-response theory maintains news conventions are not invincible, but interact with the perceptual orientations of readers who may quite radically reconceptualize them in their own individual images. In the era of the professional communicator, narrative theory forces the acknowledgement that a structuring hand and a shaping sensibility lurk beneath the surface of what may seem to be merely a transparent account of the facts of the day. (Fifty-three references are attached.) (MG)

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A NARRATIVE THEORY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING NEWS AND JOURNALISTIC FORM

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A NARRATIVE THEORY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING NEWS AND JOURNALISTIC FORM

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ABSTRACT

In the era of the professional communicator, when objectivity is the norm in reporting, narrative theory forces an acknowledgement that a structuring hand and shaping sensibility lurk beneath the surface of what may seem to be merely a transparent account of events.

A NARRATIVE THEORY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING NEWS AND JOURNALISTIC FORM

I.

More than a hundred decontextualized, formalistic paradigms of the narrative process are in existence but little work has been done to apply the insights narrative theory yields to news and journalistic form.

Paradigms of the narrative process range from Propp's analysis of the thirty-one functions (or component acts) comprising all narratives; to Levi-Strauss's notion that narratives emanate from a subterranean "deep structure" or "Ur" narrative; to White's notion that narratives reside in any structuring that yields meaningful discourse and come from the impulse "to moralize reality."[1]

A useful perspective, applicable to fictional texts, comes from Boris Tomashevsky's notion that narrative is a form in which all details contribute to a process that yields eventual closure--a form whose actions and motifs can be classified according to their relevance to the fabula (what happens) and to the syuzhet (what the story is about)

1. For a discussion of the range of narrative approaches, see Mitchell (1981).

(Martin:1986:115).

All of these theories have something to contribute to the understanding of narrative as an abstract process. But intricate, highly specified theories like Tomashevsky's, however applicable to the "poetic narratives" of literary texts, do not fit the much looser narrative structures latent in journalistic accounts.[2]

As Barthes (1977) has put it, no definition of narrative exists that holds true for all types of texts, save the broadest and most elastic, which he sees as involving merely a "donor" and a "recipient." Stated most eloquently by White (1978), this is the definition I adopt in this essay: narrative refers to any discourse explicitly structured to communicate a sense of overall meaning to an audience, rather than to chronicle events just exactly as they occurred.

White (in Mitchell, 1981) calls narrative "a metacode . . . ceaselessly substituting meaning for the straightforward copy of events recounted." Logically, of course, the"source" of such a meaningful structure must inherently be articulating a point of view, however imperceptibly. But, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Mitchell, 1981) notes, "narrative discourse is not necessarily--or even usually marked off or segregated from other discourse."

Certainly, it is frequently argued that news accounts

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2. See Lucaites (1985) for a discussion of the difference between poetic and nonfiction narrative.

are not narratives. Conventional journalistic practice is predicated on the notion that journalistic form is an essentially faithful, neutral, unstructured account of things as they are, albeit an abbreviated one and one that violates the "natural order" of occurences long enough to conform to the inverted pyramid style.

Fidelity to fact and accuracy enable the reporter to create that "realistic picture" that most newswriting textbooks teach aspiring journalists to create. The tacit argument in such books is "if it's narrative, it's not hard news or objective journalism" for, as Norman Mailer in Armies of The Night suggested, "the mythology of a technological society is that disembodied facts communicate."

Given the journalistic assumption that facts can be presented neutrally--a kind of naive empiricism (though Schudson (1978) has argued this mode of thought more-or-less expired around 1920)--news professionals tend to maintain narratives simply do not exist outside of New Journalese or "soft" feature-writing, which is openly predicated around developing a climatic, "story-like" structure.

Moreover, statements by media critics like Fiske that literary theory is not really applicable to media texts, Derridian deconstructions of narrative conventions, and postmodernist and neo-Marxist admonitions against falling prey to the false versions of reality they see (meta)narratives constituting (like those of Lyotard, 1985,

and Hall, 1984, respectively) comprise an "anti-narrative" body of literature providing arcane rationales against acknowledging narrative as an ingredient in nonfiction texts.

Further difficulties in dealing with the area of narrative, inside or outside the context of media studies, come from the fact that narrative implies three quite different, though related, things: 1) an act of transmission (subsumed under the technical term "pragmatics" and characterized by Bahktin and much later Newcomb as its "dialogic" quality; 2) a structure or way of ordering events (the aspect of narrative perhaps most directly applicable to news accounts; 3) a mode of discourse or representation which is ontologically different from the raw material of events it describes.

II.

A warrant for applying narrative theory to news, if one needs to argue such a case, can be found in Carey's (1974) statement that "we must examine journalism afresh as a cultural form, a literary act, parallel to the novel, the essay, the scientific report." As Carey points out, journalism says a lot about the assumptions of a technological age, specifying its notions of "what is considered to be real."

At least partially an "industrial art," journalistic narrative takes on a new, often close-to-imperceptible dimension. Its shaping potential remains covert and

pernicious if it is not acknowledged as a source of tacit instructions to readers to make connections between things and, as Schudson (1982) puts it, to "attend to some things and not others."

Approaches to illuminating the workings of narrative--the majority of which have been developed in the context of strictly literary texts--are of three major types, as Stine (1985) has pointed out. Some are strictly formalistic (Frye, White, Propp, Genette); some socio-cultural (Hall, Carey); and some devoted to the pragmatic or interactive dimensions of narrative transmission (Newcomb, Lyotard).

Formalist approaches are manifested in the genre analysis of media texts and popular culture. Socio-political forms stress the context from which narratives emanate. The relationship between media texts and audience is (generally rather non-empirically) examined by dialogic approaches.

In the heyday of New Criticism, formalist approaches tended to be insular and abstract. However, their more recent manifestations in Eco and Barthes' semiotic notions of "open" and "closed" or "writerly" and "readerly" texts are highly suggestive for media analysis, as Smith (1980) has noted. In a rough sort of way these approaches are analogous to McLuhan's notion of "cool" and "hot" media, respectively--a notion that was revolutionary in differentiating between sketchy, uncompleted modes of statement that invite participation, on the one hand; and

"high definition" modes of statement that leave little to be supplied by the reader, on the other.

"Open," "writerly," or "cool" messages, it could be argued, comprise what has traditionally been regarded as (good) literature in contrast to popular, "closed" forms, journalistic and non-journalistic. And one line of argument for maintaining that narrative and literary theory generally are not relevant to news texts insists that such notions apply only to works which are loosely (or under-) coded and consequently ambiguous, suggestive, and in need of considerable analysis to help elucidate their latent meaning.

These distinctions between types of literature are somewhat ironic in light of the fact that journalism was originally an epistolary or broadly literary art, routinely incorporating myth, personification, irony, paradox, emotional appeals, and colorful language, which characterized the writer (Phillips, 1976). As a consequence, prior to the onslaught of the mania for objectivity--something Schudson (1978) rightly argues is the hallmark of "an ideology in distrust of the self"--its texture was almost as rich, dense, and complex as a novel's.

What cultural and historical factors led to this change in the nature of journalistic writing? Carey (1969) in his analysis of the role of the "professional communicator" set the groundwork for contextualizing the study of journalistic narrative as well as journalism as the

expression of consciousness in a technological age.

Carey cites as the most important difference between journalistic and non-journalistic narrative the fact that "the message the professional communicator produces has no necessary relation to his own thoughts and perception" (1969:48). Carey sees journalism, like all professional communication, as resulting from a division of labor that came about in the aftermath of industrialization.

Because of the particular dislocation a technological age enforces, the professional communicator "serves a brokerage or linkage" rather than an expressive function, "manipulating and translating symbols into terms which can be easily interpreted by mass audience" (1969:28). The professional journalist's ideology--one which Schudson (1978) argues is implicitly designed to conceal the class-based nature of all supposedly neutral renditions of information--dictates that the signs of the teller be eviscerated from the tale itself, which is to appear uncrafted.

These signs include anthing that might imply a definite point of view, like adjectival or adverbial qualifiers (which characterize the writer's responsive sensibility); or metaphorical language (which constructs associations rooted in eclectic perceptions rather than ordinary logic). Quotes enable the journalist to perpetuate the illusion that news accounts are not narratives, that things virtually "speak for themselves," and that the human speaker has, in John

Cage's terms, opted for "silence" in order to allow them to better do so.

III.

Walter Benjamin wanted to write a book composed exclusively of quotations, in order to "purge all subjectivity and allow the self to be a vehicle for the expression of objective critical tendencies," according to Martin Jay in The Dialectical Imagination. This aspiration appears to be echoed, in a less ironic and despondent vein, by modern-day conventional journalists whose craft, as Carey (1977) terms it, has suffered a "conversion downwards . . . deintellectualized and technicized."

At least some literary theory would make flat, reportorial narrative--what Barthes terms "degree zero" narrative-- a conceptual reference point from which to examine more embellished and elaborated modes of statement. Pointing up the epistemological limitations of such narrative, the pseudo-realistic texture of "surfiction" or "metafiction" (especially in the stories of Barthelme or Barth), parodies the often "agentless," depersonalized prose of modern journalese. Its "characters" defined by the strictly objective indices of name, age, address, and profession, show the absurdity of using such factual criteria to objectify human identity.

Certainly, as Carey (1969), Schudson (1978), and Eason (1984b, 1987) all, in different ways, have maintained, modern journalistic objectivity aspires to the condition of

science. Its genesis is usually attributed to a need for commercial viability by appealing to mass audiences. According to their analysis, modern journalistic practices arose by way of a counter-reaction to the demise of naive empiricism and the consequent (troubling) awareness that writers inevitably construct discrepant worlds, like it or not. As the old saw has it, fifty reporters at the same scene will most likely turn out fifty different accounts of the same incident.

Journalistic narrative is an attempt to bring into line an essentially phenomenological diversity of meaningful perceptions. As Carey (1975) puts it, news accounts construct "ritual dramas, inviting our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles." By dint of their "plots" as well as their unified style and set of prescribed conventions, they function to add some commonality, some "integration and legitimation" to the increasingly diverse segments mass audiences serve in a technological age. "National media attempt to create a consensus, ...a center of value, attitude, emotion and experience,"Carey (1969:35) argues.

Carey identifies the same problem in a technological era that Yeats did: "...things fall apart/The Centre will not hold." The void needs to be filled by "new, emotionally charged symbols of national communication and the generation of integrating ideas and values" (1969). The content as well as the form of news accounts can be seen to try to do this.

News narratives can be seen to operate through a system of intertextual displacements, sometimes through omission or default. As Said has noted in The World, The Text and The Critic (1983), all texts are "political" if only because they displace other texts. Moreover, exclusion from news coverage indicates which groups are marginalized in our culture. On the other hand, news narratives convey latent as well as manifest messages. As Baudrillard, in Simulations, has stated every condemnation of wrong doing is, inherently, a celebration of the laws which operate in a given society.

Literary theory has absorbed from structuralism the notion that language is a model of how systems of relationships interact to create meanings which are always contextually-constructed. This notion of meaning as relational has as a corollary the principle that omissions are always conspicuous by their absence. What is not mentioned, as Derrida and the deconstructionists would have it, is apt to be "present under erasure." That information news accounts claim is not available shows what the anticipated forms of information are in a given culture (van Dijk, 1983).

Broadly speaking, news (explicitly "nontheoretic" though it may be) carries with it an expectation of teleology and a sense that its participants, however novel the actions they are involved in, are somehow representative of segments of society as a whole.

Carey (1969) notes the prevalence of what he calls a

"utilitarian" point of view that emphasizes "the role of personalities or actors in the creation of events"(1969:35)--an emphasis which undoubtedly works to inculcate a humanistic faith in the efficacy of human agency--a sense that individuals are always responsible for, and usually able to control, their actions. What is generally omitted from such accounts" is historical background and continuity, the motives and purposes of political actors, and the impact of technological, demographic, and other impersonal forces" (Carey, 1969).

IV.

The form of news narrative creates expectations often imperceptibly. Jonathan Culler in "Towards a Theory of Non-Genre Literature" has shown that divided into the short lines of a lyric poem, the journalistic lead has more meditative, existential resonsances than it would have if were seen in a tabloid. Schudson (1982) notes that the form of journalism is close to what Burke calls "semantic" (as opposed to "poetic" meaning)--that is, it contains meaning "without affective color or significance." According to Burke in The Philosophy of Literary Form, semantic meaning works in the same way as the conventional form of address on envelopes (name, house number, street, city, state, country), implicitly presupposing certain assumptions about space and enforcing an order that is fundamentally hierachical.

Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition points out the fact

that we need what he calls "narrative competence" to be able to make sense of such narrative conventions', although, of course, this facility is so engrained in us in modern Western cultures that it comes to seem virtually indigenous to our experience. As an example of the way we make assumptions in processing narrative material, Prince (in Tompkins, ed., 1980) notes that if two events are presented continguously, we automatically presuppose that they take place in the same scene or setting.

Some of the most important recent work, conflating the boundary between formalist and pragmatic approaches to narrative theory, has been done under the broad rubric of "reader-response criticism." This label encompasses among other things Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological criticism, Norman Holland's transactional criticism, and Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities."

As Steiner (1986), in an unpublished treatment of this topic as it relates to journalism, has noted, this type of criticism that stresses the eclectic, creative ways readers interact with printed texts to arrive at interpretions of them tends to imply "journalists are not as effective" in disseminating unequivocal messages in "hard" news as they assume themselves to be.

The thrust of reader-response criticism ,which goes further than media critics like Newcomb, Hall, Morley, or Fiske in problematizing the decoding part of the communication process, maintains that communication is not

only dialogic, but virtually determined by the reader's interaction with the text. This interaction, as Norman Holland suggests, yields diverse, personally-tailored, incomparable variant"texts," into which different readers inject something of themselves (see Tompkins, ed., 1980).

While Stuart Hall has suggested that hegemony (as it is manifested in the encoding process) restricts the range of messages readers are able to derive (or decode) from a given text to"dominant," "negotiated," and "oppositional" categories, reader-response theory, taken as a body, suggests the range of responses is so eclectic this three-fold topology is virtually useless. Only Stanley Fish, with his notion of interpretive communities, would perceive the kind of systematic (generally socio-economic) groupings in readers' responses that Hall and British cultural studies continue to argue for, despite the disappointing results of attempts at empirical confirmation like Morley's Nationwide.

On the whole, the broad-based group of approaches which fall under the rubric of reader-response criticsm would uphold Barthes's (1977) proclamation that we have witnessed in our time "the birth of the reader"---a birth which entails what Barthes has termed "the death of the author" as an authoritative, determinate voice in the process of communication. The assumption seems to be both that the process of communication is more "democratic" and more pluralistic, on the one hand; and that the old, power-laden transmission model of the communication process, in which

the source "determined" the context of the message has been superceded.

Why haven't such notions been applied to journalistic texts? As previously noted, journalistic texts tend to be "readerly" in Barthes's terms--that is, they leave less scope for interpretive maneuvering than more open-ended forms that need to be at least partially constructed by the reader to be comprehensive at all.

Journalistic accounts, then, attempt to perserve the essential authority of the narrator/reporter by circumscribing the latitude of the reader. They do this by means of clear, denotative language; clear structural priorities (dictated by the inverted pyramid format); and clear, informative explanations of processes, delimiting (as far as possible) their outcomes and their causes.

Since it is clear that texts with more connotative resonances must engage readers in the process of mentally completing their meanings, critics like Iser have questioned whether text-reader interaction is intrinsic to reading or whether it occurs only in "good literature."

My own view, rather obviously, is that it is indeed intrinsic, though in closed texts like news narratives the range of interaction is so rudimentary and text-restricted that it allows for an extremely narrow range of interpretive variation and takes places imperceptibly, as part of that process of "narrative (or linguistic) competence" critics as completely different as Lyotard and Habermas have

identified.

As Steiner (1987) points out, Fiske's notion of polysemy and Derrida's deconstructive approach have yielded some similar conclusions with implications for journalistic texts, though they were arrived at from different directions.

Fiske sees television texts as open-ended, allowing audience members from different social strata to relate their situations to what they see on the air. Derrida, more formalistically, sees an essential ambiguity in language and an irresolution (lurking behind what is perceived to be its binary structure) that makes meaning *always* subject to diverse inflections by different cultures.

As Steiner (1987) puts it, the various social experiences of audiences create diversity in the reception of texts accord to Fiske; for Derrida, however, it is the essential nature of language itself that resists being nailed down unequivocally by texts of any sort.

Deconstructionists like Derrida as well as structuralists like Barthes would no doubt agree that the culturally generated myths news narratives are predicated on give the illusion of monolithic truth to readers. Myths, as Barthes has pointed out, are networks of assumptions we no longer scrutinize.

An example of myth that Gans uses in Deciding What's News is that capitalism is "altruistic" and "responsible," refraining from unreasonable profits and contributing in

numerous, intangible ways to society. Myths like these reduce the amount of work a reader must do to interpret texts, and collapse the range of meanings an audience is apt to arrive at (Knight & Dean, 1982). As Smith (1980) points out, mass audiences consume such media texts (whose "causal chains are not open") in great numbers, "sating a hunger for redundancy and predictability."

Certainly much of the "ritual" appeal of news narratives comes from the resonance they generate as "retellings" of what come to feel like archetypal plots. News stories as a species of popular culture, are not as remote from yielding the pleasures of the nursery rhyme as it may seem, as Darnton (1975) has noted,.

Another way of looking at how news narratives function would be to see them as incorporating open-ended elements in the form of the news-gathering apparatus, while remaining essentially closed by virtue of the moralized frames such elements are impliticly placed within. Gans (1980) again must be cited as providing a useful compendium of the major variants of these ideologically-slanted narrative frames, ranging from those which maintain American values and practices are central to the whole world, to those which maintain that expressions of excess or extremism in our culture are reprehensible.

Deconstruction as well as reader-response theory can help tease out the tensions and contradictions such ideological narratives work to suppress. They can do this by

citing the multiple meanings simultaneously operative in language and by demonstrating empirically the range of responses that result at the receiving end of the reading process--a range that is inevitable given the diversity of human imagination and experience, not to mention the many different socio-cultural variables audience members are subjected to.

As a corrective for propagandistic oversimplifications of news, Bennett and Edelman (1985) have called for a "new political narrative to focus on contradictions" that surface in news coverage, pointing out that the conventions of objectivity which dictate that both sides of a story are to be given often yield two distinct and detached narratives--one devoted to each "side" of an issue--rather than a problematic treatment which results in narrative irresolution.

V.

In terms of the pragmatics of narrative transmission, the implicit rhetorical claim in news narratives is that an authoritative account is being rendered. As Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition points out, in virtually any culture the implicit claim a narrator makes for accuracy of transmission (however distorted in actual fact his tale might be) rests on the fact that the narrator has himself been the recipient of the contents of the narrative on a previous occasion. Translated into the context of news coverage, the reporter's claim would, quite obviously,

derive from the fact that he has heard first-hand the attributed material he presents to readers.

In opposition to what Carey has perceived as the general division of labor progressively taking place in the realm of mass communication as a whole, Benjamin (earlier) argued in Reflections that in the modern climate "readers [were becoming] indiscriminate collaborators in the creation of the modern newspaper." In effect, he posits a shared authority between writer and reader similar to that which reader-response theory perceives at the reception end of the communication process. Benjamin goes as far as to argue that the newspaper form has "come to be defined by readers' impatience"--which, ironically, is one of the two major textbook rationales for employing the inverted pyramid format.

Indications abound that a narrative frame and point of view lurk behind news accounts, but we are so accustomed to perpetuating as well as processing conventional news format that we rarely stop to analyze it. Martin (1986) notes that our news of the world is in the form of global stories told from the point of view of one or another power bloc.

Another indication of underlying narrative conventions at work in journalistic texts becomes clear if we observe how often what Goodman (in Mitchell, ed., 1981) has termed a "twisted tale" occurs. In this form of narrative the order of the telling blatantly reverses the order in which two or more events actually took place; and the fact that readers

effortlessly respond to the device, without feeling either confused or misled, indicates how thoroughly this convention has been assimilated in our culture.

It should be affirmed, in conclusion, that reader-response theory maintains news conventions are not invincible, but interact with the perceptual orientations of readers who may quite radically reconceptualize them in their own individual images. If the "ideal reader" of news narratives consumes them as if they were transparent transcriptions of actuality, leading to perfect closure; the "actual reader" has, if nothing else, a store of primary, unmediated experience against which to test journalistic assumptions of realism. In short, as Wordsworth stated so long ago, each person in essence "half creates" what he or she perceives to be external reality.

Rather than precisely being a record of the configurations of consciousness in a technological age, as Carey seems to suggest, journalism can be seen to cling to at least some of those residual assumptions of naive empiricism Schudson and Eason see as part of a bygone era. Like popular culture generally, it lags (perhaps nostalgically) behind the ontologically insecure, self-reflexive, anti-mimetic modes of statement which give rise to (postmodernist) metafiction in literature, making an implicit (humanistic) claim that we should believe human agents are accountable for their actions, that those actions have not unforeseen consequences, and that those

consequences, however novel they may seem to be, assume recognizable patterns. Thus news accounts, as Carey might well agree, propitiate our cultural and personal demons of uncertainty and chaos, by offering us cogent actors, closure, and an overall sense that events are inherently comprehensible.

If, as I have suggested, narrative theory has been relegated to the study of literature per se, this can only be attributed to the fact that conventional journalism has a vested interest in playing down "the existence of world views other than the reporter's own" (Eason); in disguising the fact that even professional communications partially construct the "realities" they claim to merely report; and in concealing the fact that utter neutrality toward his or her subject is a virtual impossibility for any reporter to achieve, however much it is desired.

Just as the social science researcher cannot get out from under the onus of Mannheim's paradox, so the professional communicator, even in this age of mechanical reproduction, cannot completely get out from under the onus of maintaining a craftman's relationship to the raw material of experience.

In the era of the professional communicator, in which a premium is placed on sheer information as the end product of mass communication; against those professional norms that tend to move journalism perilously close to stenography; narrative theory forces the acknowledgement that a

structuring hand and a shaping sensibility lurks beneath the surface of what may seem to be merely a transparent account of the facts of the day.

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